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ABSTRACT

Between the World Wars, a strong current of thought saw "the rural" as a reservoir of the spiritual capital of the nation, a view that stimulated back-to-the-land movements across western Europe. But the inter-war period also saw growing encounters of the urban and rural worlds, one of the interfaces being rural adult education. This paper presents two case studies of rural adult education in England during this period and argues that, despite apparent differences, both cases represent an ethos of "service and self-interest." They were both top-down interventions that allowed professional and administrative elites to move to and work in rural areas. Both projects also imagined the rural within a particular framework of class and gender relations. In Cornwall, the Workers Educational Association, in partnership with a university, extended liberal adult education to rural areas as a means of opening the gates to individual liberation. The ideological framework was one of service, but an outcome of self-interest is apparent as educators established their position as interpreters of academic culture to rural communities. In Devon, county-sponsored agricultural education for adults included "manual process" classes (in such areas as plowing and milking) that aimed to keep a low-paid but valued sector of the British race on the land, and "women's institutes" in horticulture and food preservation that promoted "active domesticity" at home or in the Empire. Government agricultural directives and funding were translated into agricultural education in Devon by the Agricultural Organiser, who also built an empire in the process with the tacit approval of the county council. (Contains 11 references.) (SV)

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Back to the land? Service and self-interest in adult education in rural England 1920-1945

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There was a strong current of thought in inter-war Europe that saw the rural as a reservoir of the spiritual capital of the nation, a location for its essential identity. Such a concern stimulated back to the land movements across western Europe. These took a variety of forms but were not simply romantic reactions against modernisation. As Gruffudd, for example, shows, back to the land movements in inter-war Wales represented 'utopian fusions of tradition and modernity which challenged the polarized notion of rural stagnation and urban modernization' (Gruffudd, 1994 : 62).

An ideology of ruralism had in the meantime become a central component of ideas of Englishness (Howkins, 1986). Miller (1995) suggests that the English case marks an extreme position. English commentators from Stanley Baldwin to J.B.Priestley were, by the 1920s, representing themselves as 'basically and innately' a rural people (Miller, 1995, 99). This entailed a view of the English countryside as timeless and tranquil, a place under threat from forces of modernisation and suburbanisation. But the inter-war period also saw growing encounters of these urban and rural worlds, one of the interfaces being that of rural adult education. The village college proposal of Henry Morris in Cambridgeshire is a case in point (Rees, 1973 : 81). Morris was 'intensely conservative' in his emphasis on morality, cultural continuity and an organic rural community with consensual social relations. But he was also a moderniser in terms of prefiguring ideas of lifelong learning and the integration of educational with the wider social, cultural and recreational activities of the community (Fieldhouse, 1996 : 52-53, 110-119).

In this paper we re-visit adult education in rural England in this period and contrast two other rural areas and two, superficially, very different paradigms for adult education. We will argue that, despite apparent differences, both our cases represent an ethos of 'service and self-interest' (Marriott, 1984). They were both top-down interventions that allowed professional and administrative elites to move to, and to live and work in rural areas. Both projects also imagined the rural within a particular framework of class and gender relations.

The first case study deals with a relatively well documented 'Responsible Body' in terms of the work of the WEA in interwar Cornwall and the growth of somewhat *ad hoc* liberal arts provision. The second study identifies a hitherto neglected space in the education of adults by examining the work of the Agriculture and Education Committees in Devon during the same period, when, as Marriott notes, local authorities were showing 'increasing' interest in adult education (Marriott, 1984: 96) and collaborating with voluntary organisations such as Women's Institutes.

The Workers Educational Association in Cornwall

Cornwall in the 1920s was a rural society with a dispersed settlement pattern of small market towns, villages and hamlets. Indeed, rural depopulation in Cornwall since the 1860s had been more pronounced than in other rural areas. The population shrank by 12% from 1861 to 1921 as the mining industry contracted sharply. A half-century of de-industrialisation had transformed this former rural industrial society into a deprived area of poverty, low expectations and a culture of out-migration. Chronic unemployment provides the background for the inter-war period. Male unemployment in the winter of 1935, not the worst winter of the 1930s by any means, averaged 22%. But in some rural areas it was much higher. For example in Gunnislake in the Tamar Valley 65% of men were without

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work; in the china clay villages of mid-Cornwall, an area badly hit by falling American demand for clay, male unemployment was 44%; in the old tin mining village of St.Agnes it was 38%.

The WEA had first appeared in Cornwall at a time of optimism and hope. From 1917 widespread general trades unionism established itself in Cornish communities in a context of a rising demand for labour. Economic demands were mirrored by social demands as newly formed Trades and Labour Councils, dominated by the Workers Union, began to make themselves heard. Out of this maelstrom came the first WEA branch, in late 1918, in Truro, anticipating the new South West District of the WEA by a few months. But this model of adult education, a product of the local upsurge of labour unrest, was short-lived. In 1920 the economic boom abated and in 1921 Cornwall was plunged back into the familiar throes of depression as the general restructuring problems of the British economy were exacerbated locally by a catastrophic drop in metal prices which decimated the remains of the Cornish mining industry. Economic collapse intersected with the relatively shallow roots labour organisations had in Cornish society. Support for WEA classes dried up. A special note was attached to the class statistics for 1921/22: 'Industrial depression has affected Cornwall classes severely' (WEA District Reports, 1920/21 and 1921/22). By 1926 the branch at Truro, one that in 1919/1920 had boasted a larger membership than the WEA branch in the city of Plymouth, had effectively collapsed. The number of WEA classes in Cornwall showed no growth between 1920 and 1928, with around 10 to 14 classes a year and those mainly in the towns.

With autonomous demands for adult education slow to appear and difficult to sustain, another model was needed. This was provided by the WEA's central organisation from 1927. From that year Districts were urged to promote educational work in rural areas. In 1930 the Carnegie Trust responded to a request for help by a three year grant for extension work in Cornwall, later extended by another two years, which ran from 1931 to 1936. With this grant the District was able to appoint two full-time tutor-organisers. In West Cornwall a young Oxford graduate and son of a local railwayman, F.L.Harris, was appointed. T.G.Jones, a Welshman and former steel worker with a long connection with the WEA in South Wales, took up the other post in mid-Cornwall.

The effect of the two full time tutors and extra resources was immediate. The number of classes increased from 13 in 1928/29 to over 60 by 1933/34. New centres were opened and old ones revived. For the first time the WEA was reaching areas outside the old industrial and market towns. Places such as St.Columb Minor, Tregony, St.Erme and Flushing reverberated to the clamour of villagers discovering their WEA classes. Clay parishes such as Nanpean and Roche and fishing communities such as Gorran and Mevagissey echoed to discussions stimulated by the WEA. This growth period of 1929 to 1934 was followed by a period of retrenchment when the Carnegie grant ended. But this was cushioned by the appointment of F.L.Harris as University College, Exeter's first Resident Tutor in Cornwall in 1935. Close relations continued between WEA and university in Cornwall where local branches were neither sufficiently strong nor established to challenge professional leadership.

But what did the rural extension of 1930-35 achieve? In what ways was it specifically rural? In one way it was the opposite of Henry Morris's community college idea. Classes and branches were implanted in the villages by professionals who lived in the towns and went to the countryside to organise and to deliver courses. Later, F.L.Harris claimed to have evolved a 'rural plan' (communication from the late F.L.Harris). This involved some experimental liaison with non-traditional partners, such as Men's and Women's Institutes and Young Methodist groups, in a quest to root adult education in local communities where the traditional labour movement was absent. But it was not a specifically rural approach. In Cornwall, rural areas were containers for a generic approach adopted for local conditions rather than objects of a specific strategy.

The WEA may not have had a clearly rural strategy when it embarked on rural extension. Bit it did bring with it its own assumptions about class and gender relations. It seems that Mansbridge had intended that 'at least three quarters of tutorial classes should be actual labouring men and women (Blyth, 1983, 14). But in Cornwall there was never a golden age of working class education. The proportion of manual workers, male and female, attending WEA classes peaked in 1926-28 at 21%.

The extension work, if anything, saw a slight reduction in this proportion. There was, however, some increase in those described as farmers and fishermen, from just 1% in 1926-28 to 4% in 1931-33. But this still meant that these rural groups were grossly under-represented in WEA classes. Despite the attention paid to extension work among the unemployed classes were more likely to be populated by professional, clerical, retail and retired groups, including women as will be discussed below.

Whereas the WEA's target population remained, broadly, the working class, gender was for all intents and purposes an invisible issue for its local professionals. And yet 48% of Cornish students were women in the 1920s. In the rural extension period this proportion fell back to 42%, perhaps due to the emphasis put on work amongst the (male) unemployed in those years. However, by the later 1930s, more women were attending WEA classes than men. Some of these women were already distinguished scholars. For instance, at Fowey, a Mrs Singer was a leading expert in medieval Spanish and had published work on alchemical manuscripts in European libraries. Nevertheless, most of the students remembered in oral accounts of the WEA in this period (by male tutors) were men. The classic account of a rural student is of a farm labourer who attended classes at Breage, a former mining village in West Cornwall, in the 1930s. As this student could not afford to buy books he trudged the four miles to the nearest market town, Helston, every Saturday evening in order to stand by a bookstall reading the stock. In this way he apparently successfully taught himself Greek! (information from Frank Turk and F.L.Harris).

The iconic stature of this 'ideal' student; male, working class, a living reminder of the self-taught Victorian autodidact, resonated deeply with the assumptions and mores of the Oxbridge educated professionals who, by the 1930s, directed the WEA in Cornwall. For this group the WEA ideal represented an escalator for working men and women to escape the constraints of time and place, an escape that they themselves had already made. In such an ideal rural/urban distinctions had little overt presence. The countryside was not romanticised; it was not seen as something innately traditional and its traditions were not something to be particularly conserved. Instead they were to be transcended through education and social mobility. Such mobility necessarily involved geographical mobility too - out of the countryside. In such a project, extending liberal adult education to rural areas was not a matter of the collective regeneration of such areas but of opening the gates to individual liberation. The ideological framework was that of service but underlying this was an outcome of self-interest as educators established their position as interpreters of academic culture to rural communities.

Agricultural adult education in Devon

It is perhaps not generally appreciated that many of the newly formed county councils in the 1890's allocated 'whisky money' from the Local Taxation (Customs and Excise Act) for the development of agricultural education (Tyler,1973) during a period in which the largest agricultural depression and flight from the land took place. The period before 1914 also witnessed the growth of agricultural colleges, research stations and county farm institutes. The professionalisation of what was still a considerable industry provided many of the lecturers and instructors who emerged in 1918 as county Agricultural Organisers and staff, and Devon proved to be no exception, particularly since its agricultural education establishment expanded duringthe interwar period. In 1921,for example, the staff of the council's Agricultural Department had a complement of eight (the Organiser himself, two district lecturers in Agriculture and one in Horticulture, two instructresses in Dairying and one instructor in Farriery and Poultry Husbandry respectively (DCC Agriculture Committee Minutes 2/12/21). By 1939, twenty full time staff were employed, thus appearing to confirm the expansionary trend already noted in Cornwall.

It could be argued that the two situations are dissimilar, since agricultural education was more vocational in contrast to that of the Cornish WEA and its efforts were directed at many who would not be categorised as being adult by contemporary or modern standards. However, it would appear that many adults did benefit from the county's schemes of agricultural education, particularly if the members of women's organisations are included, and if the term 'agriculture' is expanded to cover areas such as rural science. Moreover, the often rurally regenerative initiatives in agricultural development promoted by the state had a beneficial effect in terms of adult participation. Almost

perversely, in times of war, depression and hardship, agricultural education for adults flourished. We can now turn to examine the reasons why this transpired.

The government (and Ministry of Agriculture's) directives and funding from which adults were ultimately to benefit related to fertilisers and feeding stuffs, land drainage, pest control, animal diseases and the development of grassland, by which county councils were to act as regulatory bodies or conduct experiments as appropriate. The underlying rationale for such developments was concerned with increasing the productivity of land, livestock and agricultural self sufficiency after Germany's attempt to starve the population by submarine warfare. How these developments were translated into agricultural education in Devon was the responsibility of the Agricultural Organiser, who may equally be perceived to be building an empire in the process with the tacit approval of the county council as an LAE provider.

Even during the first world war and before, the county placed emphasis on outreach work particularly relating to dairying and farriery, and equipped vans were used to visit village centres throughout the year. After the war, such provision was rationalised by the division of the county into four districts served by individual sub-committees to whom four lecturers in agriculture were responsible. Each district drew up its own educational plan in response to local need, but developmental work also provided a further rationale for the appointment of lecturing staff. Such work ranged from teaching three year, qualificatory Agricultural Education evening classes (usually two per district) to individual advisory appointments with farmers or smallholders *in situ.* The nature of these appointments varied immensely, but rises in the figures often coincided with the publication of another government initiative, particularly as war loomed. Examples here might be related to the Ploughing up of Grasslands directive or the Land Fertilisation Act which resulted in lecturers advising farmers on the nature of their farm's soil and what quantities of lime or slag should be used to enhance its productivity. Figures extant show that 91446 visits had taken place from 1931 to 1939, when a fifth district had been created and an additional lecturer appointed. These figures also include interviews with farmers at markets and county shows. Throughout the interwar period lecturers also organised a series of successful Manual Process classes in each district in thatching, spar and rope making, ploughing, sheep shearing, hedging and ditching, stock taking and milking for labourers and farmer's sons. Talks to Agricultural Discussion Societies and Young Farmer's Clubs were also seen as agricultural development work, and by 1938 Devon led the field nationally with 50 such Clubs (DCC Minutes: Agriculture Sub-Committee Report 15/12/38).

Advisory visits and so forth included horticultural as well as agricultural developments, particularly after the cessation of free trade in 1931 which encouraged local smallholders to expand, market and package their produce and respond to the new opportunities afforded by protective tariffs on eggs, bacon, fruit and vegetables. A rise in the number of horticultural instructors ensued, together with improvements in their pay and conditions of service. Three other notable developments took place relating to the horticultural education of adults in Devon which also aided this expansion. One was concerned with the collaborative links created with the Devon Federation of Women's Institutes (DFWI), by which Miss Gunnell, a permanent, full time instructor in Horticulture was seconded in furtherance of women's agricultural work in the county in 1929 (DCC Agricultural Committee Minutes 11/9/29). This work related to the growing of small fruit bushes, and the production and preservation of food in general and resulted in over a thousand lectures and demonstrations taking place before the outbreak of war. By 1939 Miss Gunnell required an assistant no doubt in anticipation of the WI's wartime role in fruit preservation and canning.

The second development related to collaboration between a local cider manufacturer and the Agricultural Committee with regard to the extension of Devon's apple orchards. In the late 1920's a scheme was proposed and developed whereby free apple trees would be distributed to selected growers on condition that the manufacturer would receive one free ton of apples in return when the fruit trees reached maturity (DCC Agricultural Committee Minutes 16/1/25) This initiative alone resulted in a considerable number of classes and demonstrations in propagation, grafting, staking of trees and orchard management and which in part necessitated the doubling of the horticulture

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instructors by the end of the interwar period. But the most significant development related to the training of teachers in gardening and rural science; an initiative which emerged from a joint sub-committee in Education and Agriculture in the late 1920's and which aimed to promote an interest in poultry, bee-keeping and dairying in rural schools. Four additional instructresses were appointed to work with teachers in order to progress this work, and which resulted in 70-100 schools per year offering rural science to their pupils.

These six monthly classes were supplemented by visits from the travelling Dairy School which had been losing students due to the industrialisation of cheese and butter making processes. An additional rationale for the existence of the School was provided due to increases in maternal mortality and morbidity and poverty during the early 1930's, the pressure for milk in schools (particularly in Devon where there was a surplus of milk) and for nursing mothers and infants, in association with the Ministry's Clean Milk and Milk Marketing campaigns. Thus, a further instructress was appointed to assist Miss Bray, the county instructress in Dairying, whose career also illustrates the marginalisation of women in agricultural education and in the sector as a whole (Tilly and Scott: 1978)

Miss Bray was originally appointed in 1902 and became Head Instructress in 1913 at a salary of £120 p.a. Just prior to her retirement in 1939, her salary was raised to £350 p.a. a sum by which, according to the practices in Devon, agricultural and some (male) horticultural lecturers could expect within five years of their appointment. Even though Miss Bray had acted as judge in Buttermaking at national and local dairy shows, and was twice commended by the Agricultural Committee for training Champion Dairymaids (DCC Minutes 18/11/31 and 2/12/35) this achievement was not acknowledged by a rise in salary. Indeed, the county's Finance Committee twice refused proposed rises for her. Perhaps the context of the times demonstrates this bias in favour of male employees and breadwinners. For example, the number of Ministry of Agriculture scholarships awarded by the county to young adults were increased in favour of males during the height of the depression (DCC Agricultural Sub-Committee Minutes 18/11/31) whilst the Committee agreed to advertise for a male horticultural instructor in 1925 (2/12/25). The Dairy School did obtain additional help as war approached but this was related to the training of Land Army girls in dairywork, a further expansionary activity insofar as the Agriculture Department was concerned, but from which Miss Bray was unable to benefit. Her example, therefore, may illustrate that service rather than self interest informed employment in some aspects of agricultural education.

Miss Bray's example also points to the career opportunities afforded to women involved in agricultural education *per se* since although their prospects were enhanced as appears to be the case in Devon, their pay and status was normally lower than that of their male counterparts, particularly regarding work with children and other women. For example, most of Miss Gunnell's work in horticultural instruction prior to her secondment with the DFWI was concerned with school gardening.

Conclusion

We have argued that both models of rural adult education afford examples of 'top-down' interventions which allowed professionals to move, live and work in a period of expansion for higher education institutions, some voluntary organisations, and LEAs. We have also shown how economic as well as ideological factors relating to the land may have informed such interventions, the whole being informed by a framework of interwar class and gender relations. The Manual Process classes offered in Devon fulfilled many of these objectives, by aiming to keep a low paid but valued sector of the British race on the land, whilst Women's Institutes agricultural education promoted 'active domesticity' at home or in the Empire (Thompson: 2000). However, an explanation as to why Devon was one of the few counties which pioneered community education in the immediate post-war period may be due to aspects of its rural education programme, which attempted to prevent rural depopulation, increase farm incomes, enhance the quality of life for the rural population and provide vocational opportunities for its children. The advisory work with farmers and smallholders may be seen as being more responsive to adult learners - 'starting with what farmers know about current practices and then relating change to their particular concerns' (Rogers, 1993:167) and can be seen as

pioneering work in adult extension. There may well be other reasons as to why educational empires were constructed during the interwar period other than for 'evangelism, the desire to do good, careerism or self-aggrandisement' (Marriott, 1984: 100). On the evidence shown by this survey, however, it appears that *male* professionals in rural adult education had the most to gain from going 'back to the land'.

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